

The Challenge of Leadership in the Interagency Environment

William J. Davis, Jr., Ph.D.

TO ADDRESS MYRIAD ISSUES in foreign engagements across the range of military operations, numerous federal agencies are required. Military members who operate in this interagency environment may well think they have traveled to a foreign land where their cultural norms are deemed impertinent. However, the interagency environment is a cultural reality they must understand and successfully navigate to accomplish the mission. For the most part, military organizational culture is characterized by a strong hierarchy with almost absolute adherence to orders. Indeed, the first step of the Army's military decision making process is "receipt of mission," which, of course, supports the notion that higher headquarters knows best.

The interagency culture takes an antithetical slant. The interagency environment is usually one in which there is no single, distinct chain of command. It is not a monolithic hierarchical organization. It is a loose conglomeration of agencies on the same road at the same time, but all going to a different destination. In this culture, the way to accomplish the mission is to employ the "six Cs"—comprehend, coordinate, cooperate, compromise, consensus, and communication.

Comprehend

The Joint Forces Staff College conducted a needs assessment in 2002 to determine the skills and knowledge needed for an effective Joint-qualified officer. It found that the most critical requirement was an understanding of the capabilities and limitations of the military services. Working in an interagency environment is no different. Officers must know about what each participating agency "brings to the table." In a long-standing organization such as Southern Command's Joint Interagency Task Force South, agencies share offices and use procedures that involve all agencies so that participants can see the whole picture and determine what their agency can contribute. In an ad hoc or crisis situation, dialogue among the participants is critical to unveiling the capabilities and limitations of each agency. In these situations, a physical space shared by all representatives from the various agencies (to include the military) and an open and inquisitive approach from the military is necessary. As a staff member, you do not take the initiative to communicate with other agencies, do not

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PHOTO: U.S. Marine Corps Lieutenant Colonel William McCollough, second from right, commander of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, talks with members of the U.S. Agency for International Development at Patrol Base Jaker in Helmand province of Afghanistan, 16 August 2009. (DOD photo by SSgt William Greeson, U.S. Marine Corps)

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assume that they will provide information of their agency's capabilities. In addition, do not assume that they are familiar with your capabilities and limitations. The most important dynamic that agency or military representatives can establish is open dialogue. Comprehension can only be gained through such dialogue.

Coordinate

Military officers often interpret "coordination" to mean "deconfliction," but a dictionary definition tells us that the word means "to work or act together harmoniously." This does not mean that each agency stays out of the others' way, but that all agencies plan each action to maximize the effect of all other actions taking place. For example, military efforts to rebuild medical care in Mogadishu in Somalia during the early 1990s focused on the military providing free medical care to Somali nationals. However, the military failed to coordinate with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which was working to ensure that Somali doctors returned to Mogadishu. Because the military and USAID

did not coordinate their efforts, Somali nationals went to the free hospitals set up by the military, but Somali doctors lost clientele and left Mogadishu.

Cooperate

According to Webster, to cooperate is "to act jointly or in compliance with others." While one can argue that cooperation is a military value displayed throughout the chain of command, the cooperation the military most often exercises takes place within a single service. At one time, cooperation was so lacking among the military branches of service that Congress had to enact the Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 to force U.S. military services to sufficiently cooperate. There are those who argue that a similar act would force cooperation among the various agencies of the government. However, until that happens, success in the interagency environment requires agency representatives to work with each other of their own volition.

Compromise

Although the word "compromise" may have a negative connotation within the military culture,



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Students at Shikhan Kindergarten play during a visit by members of USAID, with security provided by the U.S. Army, 8 December 2009, in Shikhan, Iraq.

willingness to compromise is essential for success in the interagency environment. A common definition is “a settlement of differences reached by mutual concessions.” The military lives with compromise every day. For example, most leaders would like to have more ammunition for live-fire training, but they compromise on the allocation of ammunition for the good of the other units who also need ammunition. Military commanders probably would like more time off for their personnel after a deployment, but commanders compromise this desire for the good of the real-world mission. Compromise does not mean conceding individual values or those of an organization.

Consensus

The ability to have everyone agree—to build consensus—is a significant talent that must be mastered for the interagency environment. Going to Webster once again, we find that consensus is “a collective opinion.” Consensus building is a skill that, for the most part, is foreign to military culture. A common mantra of military officers is that “it is fine to challenge the boss, but once the decision is made, you need to follow the order as if it were your own.” Interagency decisions do not work like that. If an agency does not think a consensus has been reached, the agency may not participate in the proposed solution. Consensus is probably the most critical aspect of accomplishing national objectives during an interagency operation.

Communication

Having to communicate effectively to convince an individual or organization to do something is foreign to military personnel. The military’s hierarchical design is based upon the assumption that

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one will do what one is told by those higher in the chain of command. However, positional authority is not enough to convince agency representatives. To persuade them, one must have evidence and a sound argument to prove that what is proposed will actually contribute to solving identified problems. As an example, a commander of three multinational divisions in Bosnia had to visit each division commander after an operations order was published to convince them that the order would be good for the overall mission and their particular stake in it. Perhaps this commander may have avoided such visits by applying the six Cs *before* the order was published, but regardless, he recognized the need to effectively communicate.

Conclusion

We must take an interagency approach in the complex contingencies that the United States enters—no single agency has the knowledge, resources, or talent on its own. Such operations present unique challenges. The assumptions made when operating within one’s own organizational culture are often invalid or impractical in the interagency environment. When working with the various organizations responding to an international crisis, military members should apply the “six Cs” to ensure the optimum response to complex operations across the globe. **MR**